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**THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION NEWS COVERAGE ON  
AL-QAEDA'S OPERATIONS**

by

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June 2007

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**THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION NEWS COVERAGE ON AL-QAEDA'S  
OPERATIONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Much of what the American public knows about al-Qaeda and its most prominent member, Osama bin Laden, has been delivered through television news. It remains clear that al-Qaeda uses television news as an integral part of achieving their overarching goal, but whether television news has a reciprocal effect on al-Qaeda's future operations remains unclear. An analysis will be conducted to determine if the timing of al-Qaeda's operations coincide with an increase or decrease in public awareness of the terrorist organization based on the volume of television news coverage both the organization and its founder receive.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE

Much of what the American public knows about al-Qaeda and its most prominent member, Osama bin Laden, has been delivered through television news. It remains clear that al-Qaeda uses the television news media as an integral part of achieving their overarching goal, but whether television news has a reciprocal affect on al-Qaeda's future operations remains uncertain. An analysis will be conducted to determine if the timing of al-Qaeda's operations coincide with an increase or decrease in public awareness of the terrorist organization based on the volume of television news coverage both the organization and its founder, Osama bin Laden receive.

Bin Laden has stated his belief in the importance of harnessing the power of international and regional media to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to both a global audience as well as to specific populations such as the United States.<sup>1</sup> Since one of al-Qaeda's main goals is to reach the minds of the American public al-Qaeda may increase or decrease activity based on the extent of television news coverage they are receiving. If public perception and notoriety prove important to the goals of al-Qaeda then the media coverage they receive may influence their future actions. Analyzing the trends of television news coverage leading up to and

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<sup>1</sup> (Blanchard 2004)

following each of al-Qaeda's attacks may give insight into their decisions regarding when to strike.

## **B. METHODOLOGY**

This analysis will be conducted in three distinct parts.

### **1. Attacks Attributed to Al-Qaeda**

First, a timeline of al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks will be created. This timeline will cover the period from the 1998 United States embassy bombings through December 2006. Although Osama bin Laden officially formed al-Qaeda in 1988, they did not appear in CNN transcripts until 1998. It took the United States intelligence community an entire decade to learn enough about this elusive terrorist organization to openly speak of al-Qaeda to the American public.<sup>2</sup> Five particular attacks were chosen to study the trends between large scale events. These five events are the 1998 United States embassy bombings, the 2000 attack on the USS Cole, the attacks of 9/11, the 2004 bombings in Madrid, and the 2005 bombings of the London subway. These events were chosen to study the trends between large scale attacks and do not necessarily coincide with the five highest peaks in television news coverage.

### **2. Media Coverage**

Secondly, a timeline of the television news coverage by CNN will be created using the searchable news stories database, Nexis.com. According to *The State of the News*

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<sup>2</sup> (Thompson and Center for Cooperative Research 2004, 7)

*Media 2006*, an annual report on American journalism, CNN ranked number one in a survey entitled "Where People Go For National/International News, by Channel" edging out FOXNews, MSNBC, and CNBC in addition to network and local news stations.<sup>3</sup> This analysis will focus on the CNN television news coverage of both al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. A search will be conducted for each term by month and the volume of CNN news transcripts mentioning these search terms will be compiled. All CNN transcripts containing the search terms will be included in the data. The transcripts that do not focus on al-Qaeda or bin Laden, but rather just mention them will also be included. The goal of this data collection is not to analyze the context of the transcripts, but rather analyze the raw number of times the search terms are mentioned in television news coverage each month. This will result in two distinct data sets: CNN transcripts containing the term al-Qaeda, or the alternate spelling al-Qaida, and CNN transcripts containing the search Osama bin Laden.

### **3. Analysis of Interaction**

The third, and final, part consists of mapping the volume of television news coverage along the timeline of al-Qaeda attacks and analyzing their interaction. This map will serve to illuminate any trends that may exist between the volume of television news coverage concerning al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and the timing of terrorist attacks attributed to al-Qaeda. The existence of trends may give insight into the timing of future attacks. Furthermore, and

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<sup>3</sup> (Project For Excellence in Journalism 2006)

equally important, if no trends are evident it may suggest that al-Qaeda plans its terrorist attacks with little regard to the current coverage they are receiving in the television news.

### **C. ORGANIZATION OF THESIS**

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter II examines the relationship between the media and terrorism, in general, and highlights the role the television news has played with specific regard to the terrorist attacks attributed to al-Qaeda. Chapter III will examine the trends in two distinct periods leading up to 9/11: the period between the 1998 United States embassy bombings and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole and also the period between the USS Cole Bombing and the 9/11 attacks. Chapter IV will examine the trends in three distinct periods following the attacks of 9/11: the period between the 9/11 attacks and the 2004 bombings in Madrid, the period between the Madrid bombings and the 2005 attacks on the London subway, and finally the period between the London bombings and December 2006. Chapter V will examine the trends across the entire timeline from August 1998 up through December 2006. Chapter VI provides recommendations for future research in this area.

## **II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TELEVISION NEWS MEDIA AND TERRORISM**

### **A. THE MEDIA'S POSITION**

For the common criminal, the person he or she chooses as a victim is the target. On the other hand, for the terrorist the immediate victims are merely instrumental in achieving a calculated impact on a much wider audience.<sup>4</sup> As such, an act of terrorism is in reality an act of communication. Not the victim, but rather the message is what matters for the terrorist.<sup>5</sup>

#### **1. The Supportive Role**

Terrorists perform their violent acts to obtain the attention of the general public that they could not reach without the media communicating their deeds and carrying their messages. Metaphorically, publicity is the oxygen of terrorism. "If the media were not there to report terrorist acts and to explain their political and social significance (the motives inspiring them and so forth), terrorism as such would cease to exist."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, no other medium provides more oxygen to terrorism than television because of its ability to report from anyplace while reaching audiences in all parts of the globe. The ability to report on attacks within minutes of their occurrence and the capability to continuously update and follow stories in the immediate

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<sup>4</sup> (Nacos 2002, 10)

<sup>5</sup> (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, 14)

<sup>6</sup> (Nacos 1994, 48)

aftermath sets television news aside from other media sources. The television news plays a leading role in the calculus of terrorism, regardless of whether the attacks are major or minor in size. Whatever else their immediate and ultimate goals prove to be, those who plan terrorist attacks are well aware that the mass media are central to furthering their publicity goals and even their political and religious objectives. The act of terrorism serves as the master key for unlocking the door that grants access to the mass media.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. A Mutual Pairing**

The television news is in a strange, almost symbiotic relationship with terrorism because of the high news value of terrorist action. By accommodating terrorists and their propaganda schemes, news organizations are simultaneously serving the needs and purposes of their corporate bosses and stockholders.

The terrorists need the media, and the media find in terrorism all the ingredients of an exciting story...Media coverage has supplied constant grist to the terrorist mill; it has magnified the political importance of many terrorist acts out of all proportion.<sup>8</sup>

Terrorists who despise modern technology and the America's open media society are simultaneously experts in the use of them. Terrorist organizations are well aware of the media attention rules which include sensationalism, violence, and surprise and, as a result, they ensure their action

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<sup>7</sup> (Nacos 2002, 169)

<sup>8</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 168-9)

satisfies these criteria.<sup>9</sup> They organize and execute their attacks in anticipation of the impact on television news and the symbolic power that the worldwide broadcasted images will have. Terrorists use television news organizations as their advertising agencies, recruiting them to provide intense coverage to increase the societal impact of an attack. By using sensational and innovative methods of attack, selecting high-profile targets, and submitting prepared statements claiming responsibility directly to television news organizations, terrorists assure that their acts can not be ignored. Terrorism, by offering villains and heroes that promise to attract new audiences and keep existing ones, fits snugly into the growing trend of combining hard news with human drama stories that the television news increasingly prefers. Perhaps unwittingly, terrorism provides television news with some of the most watched and lucrative news stories while, simultaneously, television news serves as an instrument of terrorist propaganda.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. A Corner of the Triangle**

Most terrorists calculate, in advance, the consequences of their deeds.<sup>11</sup> Mass-mediated terrorism refers to political violence against noncombatants committed with the sole intention of publicizing the deed which gains them publicity and the attention of both the government and public. In a democratic society with relatively open

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<sup>9</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 163)

<sup>10</sup> (Nacos 2002, 10)

<sup>11</sup> (Nacos 2002, 11)

channels of communication, such as the United States, mass-mediated terrorism proves a very attractive weapon. Terrorists plan their attacks to ensure the likelihood of gaining the attention of the television news and, more importantly, gaining entrance into *The Triangle of Political Communication* depicted in Figure 1.<sup>12</sup>

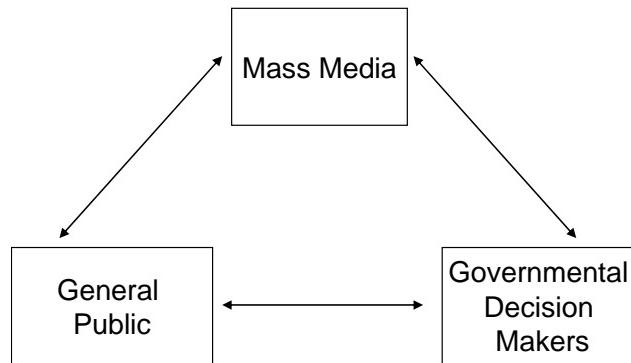


Figure 1. The Triangle of Political Communication<sup>13</sup>

The media, in this case television news, the general public and governmental decision makers represent the three corners of the triangle. Furthermore, television news provides the crucial lines of communication between United States governmental offices and the American public in an era when direct contact and communication between the decision makers and the public proves impossible. Television news is not a passive channel for communication, but rather an active participant in this model. For that reason, the television news represents an entire corner of the triangle rather than a single line of communication between governmental decision makers and the American public. Television news retains the ability to magnify, minimize, include, and exclude any information provided to them. This fact is not unknown to

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<sup>12</sup> (Nacos 1994, 11)

<sup>13</sup> From: (Nacos 1994, 11)

terrorists and, for that reason, the media represents the gatekeeper for access to governmental decision makers and the public at large. Terrorists have grown to expect that during spectacular terrorist attacks television news will open the gates and publicize not only the attacks themselves, but also the calculated messages that terrorists want publicized. Because of this important triangle of communication, when terrorists strike, their deeds assure them the attention of not only television news outlets, but the American public and United States government as well.

#### **B. AL-QAEDA**

This section will summarize the strategies and goals of al-Qaeda in order to highlight the symbiotic relationship that exists between television news and a terrorist group such as al-Qaeda.

##### **1. Background**

Al-Qaeda was created in 1988 through the union of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's ideology and the financial resources of one of his pupils, Osama bin Laden.<sup>14</sup> This partnership laid the foundation of an organization committed to Islam's jihad against invaders. This original vision was modified to global jihad against the West when bin Laden became the senior leader of al-Qaeda after Sheikh Azzam's death in 1989.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> (Bruce, Kemmerly, and Banks 2006, 20)

<sup>15</sup> (Bruce, Kemmerly, and Banks 2006, 21)

## **2. Enemy**

Although created in 1988, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden did not emerge as internationally recognizable entities until bin Laden delivered his 1996 fatwa which declared jihad against the United States. Azzam and bin Laden laid the foundation for al-Qaeda in their recruiting of mujahideen, translated as holy warriors, to help defend Afghanistan against the Soviet invasion.<sup>16</sup> With the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, bin Laden and his colleagues began looking for new jihads.<sup>17</sup> The mujahideen resistance to the Soviet invasion is thought to have provided the backdrop for Osama Bin Laden's belief that Muslims could take effective military action inspired by select Islamic principles. Bin Laden characterized the presence of the United States in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War as cause for renewed commitment to defensive jihad and the promotion of violence against the Saudi government and the United States.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not until his 1996 religious edict that bin Laden formally declared war against the United States based on their military presence in the Middle East, their support for Israel, and the occupation of Iraq.<sup>19</sup> Bin Laden referred to this declaration against the United States and extended the declaration of war to the American public in future public statements. For example, in bin Laden's 1998 fatwa he sanctioned attacks against all

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<sup>16</sup> (Landau 2002, 41)

<sup>17</sup> (BBC News 2004)

<sup>18</sup> (Blanchard 2004, 2)

<sup>19</sup> (U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence 2006, 6)

Americans, including civilians. To inform the American public that the attacks of 9/11 were not the end bin Laden, in a 2002 statement, made it clear that attacks against the American people were still fully justified by stating:

They [Americans] are the ones who pay taxes which fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf, and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq. The American people are the ones who employ both their men and their women in the American Forces which attack us.<sup>20</sup>

Al-Qaeda felt obligated to confront Western forces present in the Muslim region and repeatedly returned to the issue of America's military presence in Muslim countries. Bin Laden urged that America must be dealt with before Middle Eastern governments, such as Saudi Arabia, can be purified.

### **3. Goals**

Throughout their existence under the leadership of Bin Laden, al-Qaeda's religious and political rhetoric has remained consistent. Bin Laden sees himself and his followers as the forerunner in an international Islamic movement committed to ending interference by the United States in the affairs of Islamic countries.<sup>21</sup> According to bin Laden, Muslims should view themselves as a single nation and must unite to defend against anti-Islamic aggression. Furthermore, non-Islamic government is unacceptable and Muslims should all join al-Qaeda or other groups and movements in opposing those who seek to establish secular

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<sup>20</sup> (bin Laden 2002)

<sup>21</sup> (Blanchard 2004, 5)

democratic governments or maintain existing governments deemed insufficiently Islamic.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Strategy**

Al-Qaeda relies on terrorist attacks to propagate the organization's ideology among its current supporters and potential recruits. Al-Qaeda will cease to exist as the dangerous network they are today only when they can no longer effectively recruit supporters from around the world.<sup>23</sup> Al-Qaeda does not simply increase the number of attacks to aid recruitment, but rather waits patiently for the right opportunity to attack. The leaders of al-Qaeda favor attacks that meet certain criteria, including high symbolic value, mass casualties, severe economical damage, and maximum psychological trauma. Al-Qaeda has never lacked patience in both the operational planning and execution of its attacks. The absence of additional attacks does not mean al-Qaeda has lost the will or ability to attack, but rather that the group's operatives might simply be in the planning phase of their next strike. Although the loss of key personnel, training camps, and lines of communication has hindered al-Qaeda's near-term operational capabilities, the group remains the single, greatest threat to America, our allies, and our interests abroad.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> (Katzman 2005, 8)

<sup>23</sup> (U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence 2006, 10)

<sup>24</sup> (U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence 2006, 21)

## **5. Use of the Media**

Since surfacing in the Western media, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda have conducted an influential public relations and media campaign though the use of faxed statements, audio recording, video appearances, and internet postings. Bin Laden has personally expressed his belief in controlling the power of the international media for the benefit of al-Qaeda. By releasing statements and tapes at times and in a manner of his choosing he retains significant control of the propaganda timeline.<sup>25</sup> Depending on the target audience, statements issued by bin Laden vary in tone and content. In statements addressed to the United States and the rest of the Western world, bin Laden attempts to portray himself as a statesmanlike figure by downplaying threats of violence in an effort to make his statements more palatable to Western audiences and appealing to moderate Muslims. Bin Laden relies on terrorism as a vehicle to dispatch his messages. Analysts believe bin Laden's messages are designed to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to a global audience.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, his messages may contain signals that inform and instruct operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, these statements sanction and encourage future terrorist operations.

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<sup>25</sup> (Bruce, Kemmerly, and Banks 2006, 33)

<sup>26</sup> (Blanchard 2004, 1)

<sup>27</sup> (Blanchard 2004, 1)

## C. THE MEDIA'S ROLE

### 1. Four Functions of Television News

When terrorist attacks occur, the functional importance of television news increases because the American public requires explanation and direction during a time of crisis. As a result, they devote extraordinary focus on news gathering and reporting. According to Greenberg, in his book *Communication and Terrorism*, the television news outlets are simply responding to the general public's heightened need for information, explanation, solidarity, and tension reduction.<sup>28</sup>

#### a. *Surveillance*

Surveillance illustrates the information role of the television news. Mass communication via the television news, alerts the American public and allows for the monitoring of government activities. Additionally, television news assists crisis managers in communicating important information to the public. By serving a watchdog role, they track activities in the current environment as well as monitoring internal and external activities and potential threats. The television news relies more heavily on government sources during a crisis situation involving national interest to ensure that false, or misleading, information is not further disseminated to the American public.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 37)

<sup>29</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 39-40)

***b. Correlation***

Correlation represents the explanation function within television news. This allows the television news to educate the American public and highlight important issues and events.<sup>30</sup> Terrorist attacks usually include an overabundance of facts, figures, and unconnected details. As a result, the American public relies on the television news media to wade through all the information available and deliver a concise story which attempts to make sense of a senseless act. In addition, television news concentrates on what has happened and helps coordinate the relief work. This reassures the public by illustrating that authorities are properly coping with the disaster.

***c. Socialization***

Socialization serves to connect people to larger society through television news. This increases social cohesion during a time of crisis. Television news provides a window view of terrorist attacks and creates a virtual meeting place in which Americans sitting in their homes can watch, react, and grieve along with the people at the scene. The simple presence of credible information and sources provided by the television news can help provide greater comfort than one's own family during the time of a national crisis.<sup>31</sup> The television news broadcasts reactions from ordinary people and comments from officials striving to maintain law and order. This satisfies the American

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<sup>30</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 39-40)

<sup>31</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 42)

public's need for interpretations, reassurance about the social values of society, and help in expressing grief. Television news bonds people to their society by reinforcing social norms and rules and bringing a sort of justification to the fears and reactions of the American public. In addition, during times of extreme crisis television news has demonstrated the ability to abandon cynicism, negativism, and attack journaling in favor of reporting an outburst of civic spirit, unity, and patriotism. In the wake of terrorist attacks, television news serves to support social reintegration.

***d. Entertainment***

By no means trivial, the entertainment aspect includes the rest, relaxation, and tension reduction function of television news. During a crisis involving national interest, the media serves as not only an information source, but a source of guidance and condolence as well. A simple recurrent news frame can portray the reassurance provided by officials, the strength of the people involved in a tragedy, and the eventual restoration of order. During a period of time with many unknowns, television news serves to help reduce some of the anxiety associated with the uncertainty of the crisis. Unfortunately, television news outlets in the United States are in a fiercely competitive market for their audiences and under constant pressure to be first with the news and to provide more information, excitement, and entertainment than their rivals.<sup>32</sup> As a result, they are bound to respond to

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<sup>32</sup> (Nacos 2002, 29)

terrorist propaganda in the form of attacks because it is dramatic bad news. High television news rankings strive on the very images and themes that terrorist incidents offer and these ingredients prove ideal for transforming real life terror into breathtaking thrillers or heartbreaking soap operas designed to captivate and stir up audiences.

## **2. Satisfying the Three Universal Goals of Terrorists**

### **a. *Spread of Fear and Anxiety***

By staging increasingly shocking events, terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda highlight the inability of a targeted government to prevent and protect its citizens from terrorism. Ignoring, or simply not televising news regarding such attacks is not an option because television news serves as the most effective and efficient method for citizens to receive important messages from public and private authorities.<sup>33</sup> As a result the American public becomes almost completely dependent on television for important news that may be vital for survival. Likewise, prominently covered terrorist attacks not only gain the attention of the American public, but also increase public anxiety, which in turn, makes the public more vulnerable to further manipulation by terrorist attacks in favor of specific future goals.<sup>34</sup> Through their attacks terrorists hope to accomplish their aim of stirring public emotions and, as a result, display their influence on what decision makers can and cannot do. Terrorists go out of their way to

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<sup>33</sup> (Nacos 1994, 55)

<sup>34</sup> (Nacos 1994, 69)

provide television news outlets with exceptionally cruel, shocking, and frightening images. These premeditated terrorist attacks are executed in a way that virtually assures a great deal of news coverage. In a videotape sent following the attacks of 9/11, bin Laden states: "There is America, full of fear from north to south, from west to east. Thank God for that."<sup>35</sup>

***b. Recognition***

Terrorists depend on and strive for television news coverage regardless of its content. They do not seek approval or disapproval for their actions, but rather the awareness of the American public in general. In fact, the negative portrayal of terrorists in the Western media simultaneously provides them a source of glorification in their home base.<sup>36</sup> Not only do they seek recognition of their attacks, but also that of their demands, their grievance, and their causes. Television news outlets report terrorist incidents objectively and factually which simply accommodates the terrorists' desire to publicize their cause. By familiarizing the American public with their causes and grievances, terrorists are attempting to convince Americans that the violent acts are in fact justified responses to wrongs committed against their people by or with the support of the United States government. Bin Laden plays the role of the victim in claiming his declaration of jihad is simply a defense against the growing war on Islam

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<sup>35</sup> (Nacos 2002, 42)

<sup>36</sup> (Greenberg 2002, 172)

for which the United States should be punished.<sup>37</sup> Terrorists gain attention and recognition when the volume and placement of news coverage begins to affect the public agenda.<sup>38</sup> Television serves as an outlet for the terrorists to appeal directly to the public over the head of the government.

**c. *Respectability and Legitimacy***

Television news reporting makes the names of terrorists, previously unknown to the American public, household names. Following the attacks of 9/11, bin Laden was treated like a legitimate celebrity in television news. The television news outlets covered him as America's number one enemy, not only making him well known to the entire American public, but also bolstering his popularity, respectability, and legitimacy among millions of Muslims.<sup>39</sup> A horrific act of terror turned a notorious terrorist into one of the world's leading newsmakers. Bin Laden, and his following, preoccupied not only America and the West, but literally the entire world and this was clearly reflected by television news. By devoting extraordinary broadcast time to terrorist attacks and elevating them to the level of a spectacle, television news played directly into the hands of terrorists. Furthermore, they bestow respectability and perhaps even a hint of legitimacy upon terrorists simply by interviewing them and agreeing to meet with them face to

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<sup>37</sup> (Blanchard 2004, 3)

<sup>38</sup> (Nacos 1994, 73-74)

<sup>39</sup> (Nacos 2002, 48)

face.<sup>40</sup> When a terrorist is interviewed by a respected television news representative, they are treated as someone whose contribution to public debate is worthy of attention thus virtually elevating them to the level of a legitimate politician.<sup>41</sup> Television news outlets often legitimize a terrorist's actions.

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<sup>40</sup> (Nacos 1994, 69)

<sup>41</sup> (Nacos 1994, 66)

### **III. ANALYSIS OF COVERAGE BEFORE 9/11**

#### **A. AL-QAEDA BEFORE COVERAGE BEGINS**

On August 11, 1988, Osama bin Laden conducted a meeting to discuss the establishment of a new military group. Over time, this group became known as al-Qaeda, however, it took the United States intelligence community years to realize a group named al-Qaeda existed.<sup>42</sup> The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia provide an example of attacks that were well publicized, but, at the time, made no mention of al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden who were later suspected to be heavily involved in both attacks.<sup>43</sup> Although neither al-Qaeda nor bin Laden received mention in the immediate coverage of either event, years later both terms became closely related to the attacks. This illustrates how al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden often receive television news coverage for events they were responsible for years prior. The patience al-Qaeda displays in realizing the fruition of their attacks is one of the aspects of this terrorist organization that makes it very difficult to track and predict.

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<sup>42</sup> (Thompson and Center for Cooperative Research 2004, 7)

<sup>43</sup> (Wedgwood 2002, 330)

## **1. 1993 World Trade Center**

### **a. *Background***

On February 26, 1993 the World Trade Center, in New York City, suffered a bomb explosion in the parking garage. The blast misfired and did not topple the World Trade Center, as hoped, but the explosion still killed six and injured more than 1000 people.<sup>44</sup> Despite the relatively low death toll, the bombing was, at the time, the gravest attack of international terrorism to occur on American soil. The terrorists responsible intended to disrupt the dynamics of daily life, commerce, and finance in one of the most heavily populated cities in the United States.<sup>45</sup> It took nearly two years for an arrest to be made and on February 7, 1995 Ramzi Ahmed Yousef was arrested in a Pakistani guesthouse reportedly owned by the Bin Laden family and frequently used as an al-Qaeda safe house. Financial and logistical ties were made between Yousef and the Saudi billionaire, Osama bin Laden and in 1998, Yousef was convicted of serving as the mastermind behind the bombing.<sup>46</sup>

### **b. *What the Television News Reported***

The immediate coverage of the 1993 World Trade Center attack highlighted America's vulnerability. Americans, at large, believed that such acts could not occur on American soil, but this bombing brought the reality of terrorism close to home. Without an immediate culprit, the

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<sup>44</sup> (Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism)

<sup>45</sup> (The Joint Terrorism Task Force 2005)

<sup>46</sup> (Thompson and Center for Cooperative Research 2004, 11)

television news was left to deliver speculations on who was behind the attack and what message they were trying to deliver.<sup>47</sup> The governor of New York at the time, Mario Cuomo stated that:

Fear is another weapon that's used against you, and that's what terrorists are all about, if these were terrorists. And what they're trying to do is deny you normalcy, and what we must do in this safest and greatest city and state and nation in the world is return as quickly as we can to normalcy.<sup>48</sup>

The lack of someone to blame only heightened this fear because the government remained unable to demonstrate to its citizens that it was actively dealing with those responsible. With a faceless enemy, the majority of the television news coverage focused on reassuring American citizens that although the United States is obviously not immune to acts of terror, it remains one of the strongest and safest countries around the globe and that every effort would be made to apprehend the culprits.

## **2. 1996 Khobar Towers Attacks**

### **a. *Background***

On June 25, 1996 a fuel truck bomb exploded outside the housing complex for United States Air Force personnel in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on the King Abdul Aziz Air Base. Nineteen American airmen were killed and an additional 500 people were injured in the explosion.

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<sup>47</sup> (Shields and Novak 1993)

<sup>48</sup> (Holliman 1993)

Members of the Iranian-influenced group, Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for the attacks, but in a 1998 interview, two years after the bombing, Osama bin Laden admits instigating the attack.<sup>49</sup>

***b. What the Television News Reported***

In contrast to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the television news coverage of the 1996 Khobar Towers explosion was minimal. In the three days following the attacks, the Khobar Towers explosion was only mentioned in seven television news transcripts, compared to the 97 transcripts that mentioned the World Trade Center bombing. Although twenty-three American citizens were killed, the fact that the attack did not occur on American soil immediately minimizes the impact on American citizens and the level of fear among Americans remains much lower when the attack occurs in a distant country. In addition, the Khobar Towers explosion was easier for the American public to comprehend because it was a military target making the threat far less imminent for civilian Americans. Regardless, the government assured American citizens, through television news coverage, that the United States would not rest until the terrorists were captured and held responsible.

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<sup>49</sup> (Thompson and Center for Cooperative Research 2004, 17)

## **B. 1998 EMBASSY BOMBINGS**

### **1. Background**

On August 7, 1998 a suicide car bomb exploded outside the United States embassy in Nairobi, Kenya killing 213 people, including 12 United States nationals, and injuring over 4500 people. The attack in Kenya coincided with another suicide attack on the United States embassy in Tanzania which left 11 people dead and another 85 people injured. A third bombing attempt on the United States embassy in Uganda failed. This was the first set of attacks that demonstrated al-Qaeda's ability to conduct simultaneous attacks. Four men were convicted in October 2001 for the bombings, marking the first United States prosecution involving members of al-Qaeda.<sup>50</sup>

### **2. Presentation of the Models**

Beginning with the 1998 embassy bombings and continuing with the subsequent event analyzed Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were mentioned in television news reports of each attack. As a result, the volume of television news coverage received by both Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda is mapped and analyzed in each period investigated starting with the 1998 embassy bombings and continuing through December 2006.

#### **a. Osama bin Laden**

Prior to the 1998 United States embassy bombings in Africa, Osama Bin Laden had only been mentioned in three CNN news transcripts. In the month of August alone, bin

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<sup>50</sup> (Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism)

Laden was mentioned in 117 transcripts. Following the coverage of the United States embassy attacks, the exposure Osama bin Laden received immediately declined and the only time he was mentioned in more than 15 transcripts in the 26 month period before the USS Cole bombing was in December 1999. Forty-six of the 74 December transcripts mentioned bin Laden with respect to the increased terrorism measures that were put in place surrounding the millennium celebrations. As stated on the CNN Morning News Osama bin Laden was listed as a top priority:

Of particular concern are associates of suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden. A joint CIA-FBI special unit continues efforts to track and disrupt suspected bin Laden operations around the world. With the New Year rapidly approaching, law enforcement officials are taking no chances.<sup>51</sup>

Immediately following the millennium celebrations, the coverage of Osama bin Laden fell again and hovered below 15 mentions once again until the USS Cole bombing in October, 2000.

As seen in Figure 2, Osama bin Laden received a notable amount of television news coverage twice during this 26 month period; however both periods of peak coverage resulted from very different actions. In August 1998, bin Laden was mentioned in direct connection with a terrorist attack on United States assets in which the terrorist group that he founded claimed responsibility.

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<sup>51</sup> (Harris and Thomas 1999)

**CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden  
(1998 United States Embassy Bombings - 2000 USS Cole Bombing)**

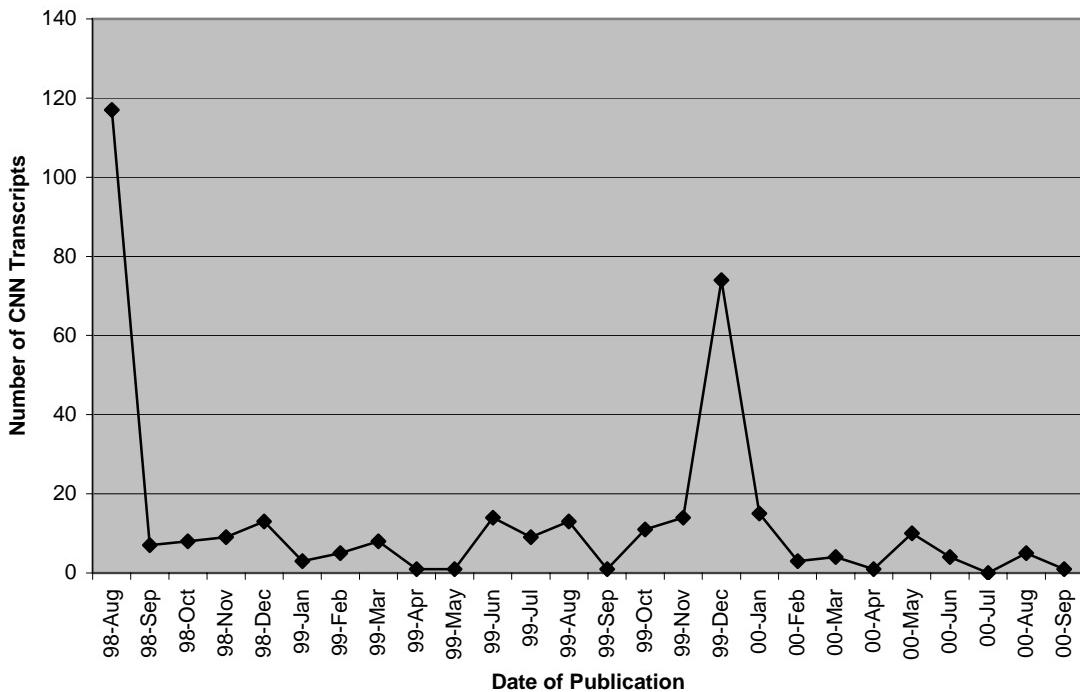


Figure 2. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden Between the 1998 United States Embassy Bombings and the 2000 USS Cole Bombing

However, in December 1999, bin Laden once again received a notable amount of coverage yet he did not have to do anything but remain a threat in order to enter every American household with a television. The embassy attacks may have all occurred in one day, but the notoriety and coverage provided to bin Laden, for his role in the attacks, extended for years.

#### **b. Al-Qaeda**

As Figure 3 illustrates, al-Qaeda, in contrast to Osama bin Laden, received very little coverage not only immediately following the United States embassy bombings,

but during the entire 26 month period analyzed. The vertical scale used in Figure 3 is the same as the scale used in the analysis of television news coverage of Osama bin Laden during this same period. Choosing the same vertical scale highlights precisely how few CNN transcripts mentioned al-Qaeda during this entire period.

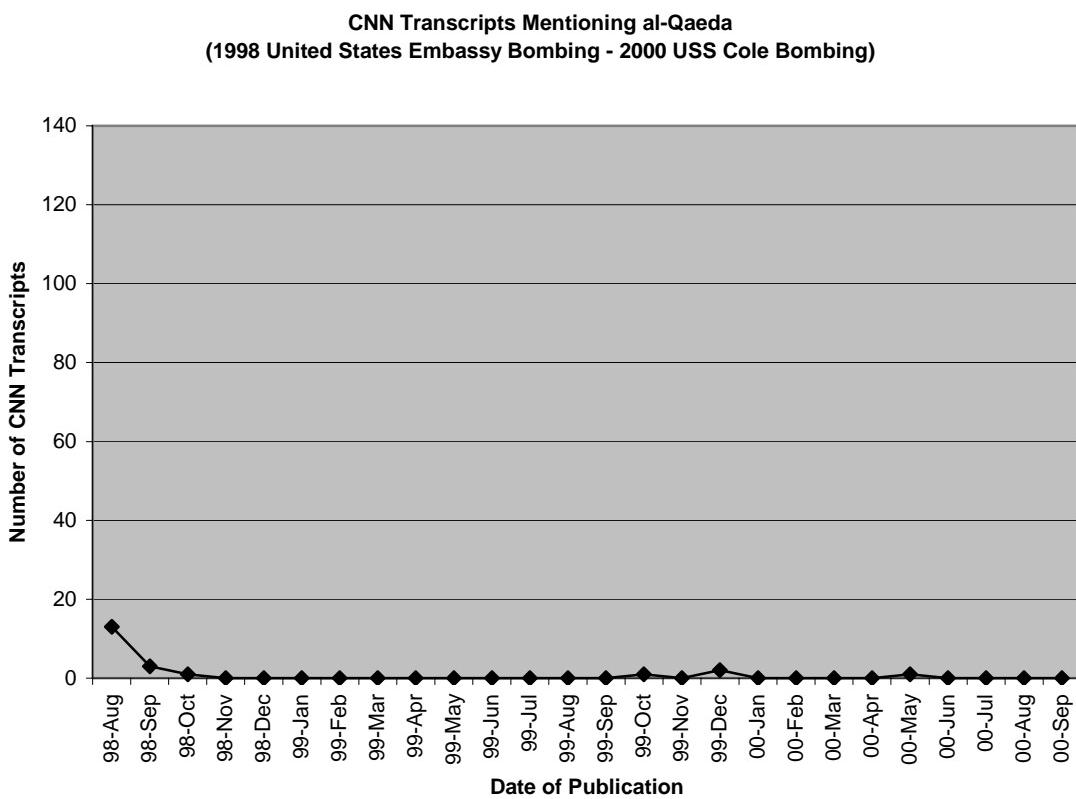


Figure 3. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between the 1998 Embassy Bombings and the 2000 USS Cole Bombing

In fact, during this time alone, al-Qaeda was not mentioned in any CNN transcripts during 20 of the 26 months. The terrorist organization was first mentioned in a CNN transcript on August 20, 1998, 13 days after the bombings

took place.<sup>52</sup> In all, al-Qaeda was only mentioned in 20 CNN transcripts between the United States embassy bombings and the USS Cole bombing.

### C. THE 2000 USS COLE BOMBING

#### 1. Background

On October 12, 2000 a small boat that was helping a United States Navy destroyer to moor, exploded as the USS Cole was in the Yemen port of Aden for refueling. The explosion created a 20 foot by 40 foot hole in the side of the ship killing 17 and injuring 39, all of whom were United States Navy personnel. The motive for the attack appears to have been a generalized protest against American involvement in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> This attack against a United States Navy warship demonstrated that the strongest military in the world is not impervious to such acts of terrorism. Early investigation suggested that members of al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, were behind the attack.

#### 2. Presentation of the Models

##### a. *Osama bin Laden*

The attack upon the USS Cole marked the second time Osama bin Laden was mentioned in more than 100 CNN transcripts. As was the case following the United States embassy bombings, the television news coverage of bin Laden immediately dropped in the month directly following the attack. As depicted in Figure 4, a small spike in coverage

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<sup>52</sup> (Chen and Venter 1998)

<sup>53</sup> (Lin 2000)

occurred in February 2001 as Bin Laden was mentioned a total of 22 times, more than half of which mentioned him with regard to the ongoing trial of the four al-Qaeda operatives convicted in the 1998 United States embassy bombings. A second spike occurred a few months later during May and June for the same reasons. 41 of the 54 CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden during those months also mentioned the ongoing trial.

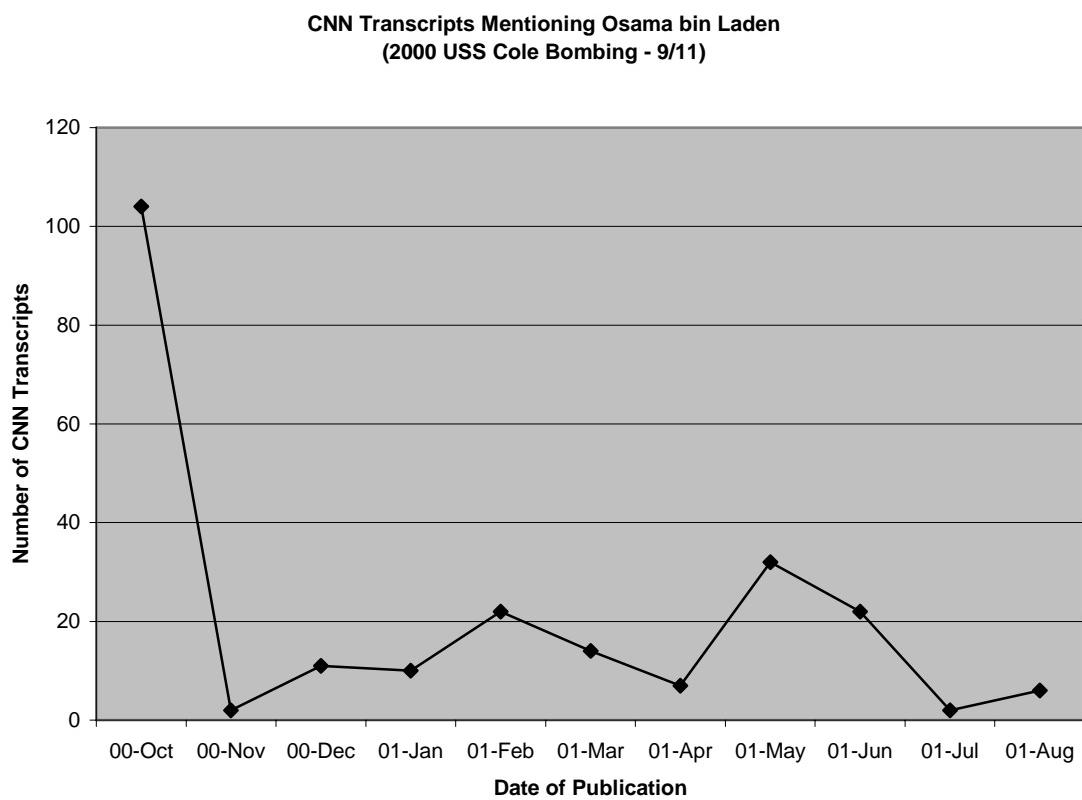


Figure 4. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden Between the 2000 USS Cole Bombing and 9/11

Although the bombings on the United States embassies in Africa took place in 1998, these data illustrate that the effects and coverage of the attacks were longer-lasting. Three years later Osama bin Laden continued

to receive television news coverage for taking part in the orchestration of the United States embassy bombings. Television news coverage of the initial attack may have only lasted a few days, but the coverage around the extensive trial ensured that the American public would not soon forget Osama bin Laden.

**b. Al-Qaeda**

Al-Qaeda was only mentioned in CNN transcripts a total of 21 times during the period between the USS Cole bombing and 9/11. In the transcripts immediately following the USS Cole bombing, Osama bin Laden was listed as the number one suspect, but as voiced by former CIA Counterterrorism official, Stan Bedlington, a connection with a larger terrorist organization remained in question.

Again, we will have to wait and see what the result is. If these people arrested in Yemen belong to al-Qaeda, which is Osama bin Laden's overseas network, then they would, in fact, belong to a much larger group of people almost with the strength of a state behind them.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, although four al-Qaeda operatives were convicted and sentenced for the United States embassy bombings during this period, the coverage of al-Qaeda during the on-going trial did not parallel the extensive coverage that Osama Bin Laden received during those same months as Figure 5 illustrates. The vertical scale used in Figure 5 is the same as the scale used in the analysis of television news coverage of Osama bin Laden during this same period. Choosing the same vertical scale highlights precisely how

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<sup>54</sup> (Lin 2000)

few CNN transcripts mentioned al-Qaeda during this entire period. The articles regarding the trial of the four men simply stated that "those two explosions [the United States embassy bombings]... were part of a worldwide conspiracy involving the organization led by Osama bin Laden."<sup>55</sup>

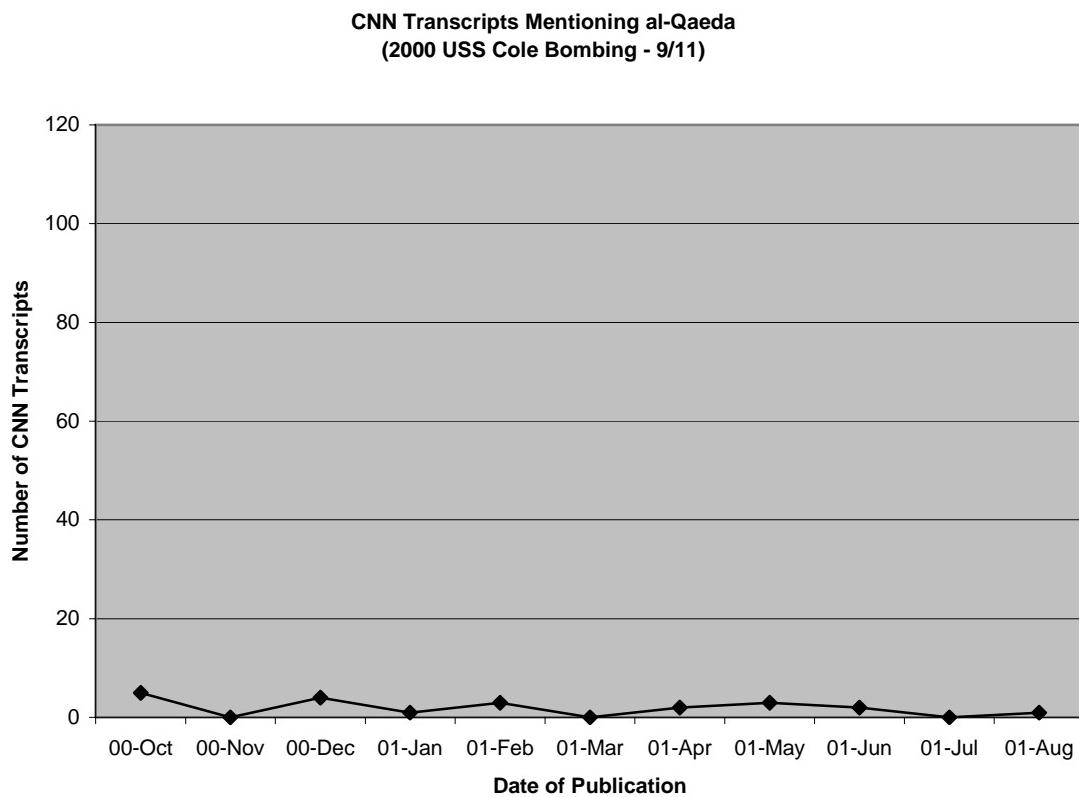


Figure 5. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between the 2000 USS Cole Bombing and 9/11

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55 (Lin and Franken 2001)

## **IV. ANALYSIS OF COVERAGE FOLLOWING 9/11**

### **A. 9/11**

#### **1. Background**

On the morning of September 11, 2001 four planes were hijacked with the intent to conduct suicide flights into four buildings. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for these four attacks that resulted in the deaths of over 3000 people. This event brought the images and stories of Osama bin Laden and the terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, into every American home via the television news media.

##### **a. World Trade Center**

The site of the first two attacks that morning was the World Trade Center in New York City. At 8:46 a.m. hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 en route from Boston to Los Angeles crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. As first responders and the rest of the world were trying to wrap their minds around such a tragedy, a second hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 175 following the same route crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center at 9:03 a.m.

##### **b. Pentagon**

At 9:37 a.m. a third hijacked plane, American Airlines Flight 77 en route from Dulles International Airport to Los Angeles crashed into the helicopter landing pad on the west side of the Pentagon. This attack killed 189

people, including 125 people in the Pentagon and 64 people from the plane, and injured an additional 76 people.

**c. Pennsylvania**

The fourth and final attack occurred at 10:06 a.m. when United Airlines Flight 93 en route from Newark, New Jersey to San Francisco was hijacked and diverted from its original route. It is believed that hijackers were overtaken by the passengers on board causing the plane to crash in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The hijacked plane could have been headed towards the White House or the Capitol Building in Washington, DC.

**2. Presentation of the Models**

**a. Osama bin Laden**

As early as 9:52 a.m., before the fourth plane had even crashed in Pennsylvania CNN reports "the initial assumption...was that this had something to do, or at least they were looking into any possible connection with Osama bin Laden."<sup>56</sup> This marked the first of 591 CNN transcripts that mentioned bin Laden in September, 2001. In that one month alone, bin Laden received more television news coverage than he had received in the five years prior, since first being mentioned in a June 1996 transcript. Through the end of 2001, television news coverage of bin Laden remained high reaching a high of television news coverage of 745 CNN transcripts in December 2001. With the start of 2002, the television news coverage of bin Laden drastically

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<sup>56</sup> (Brown and King 2001)

fell and then began a slow overall downward trend through February 2004, the month preceding the attacks on the Madrid train line system.

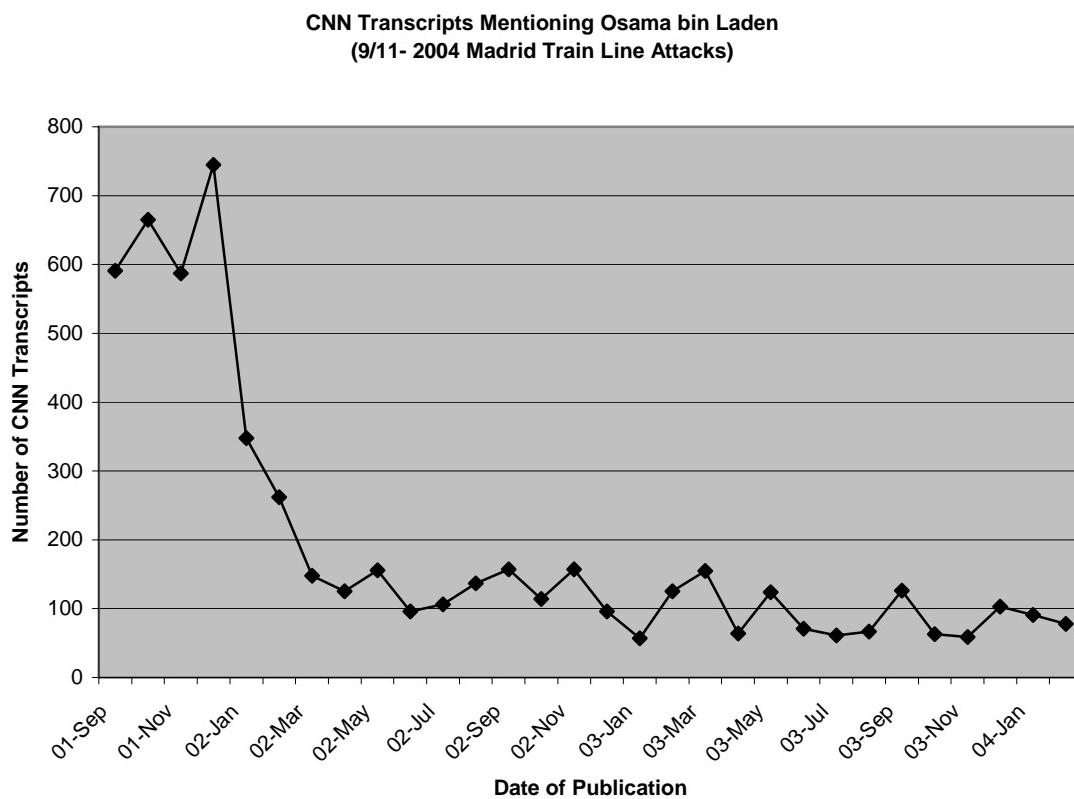


Figure 6. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden Between 9/11 and the 2004 Madrid Train Line Attacks

As illustrated in Figure 6, after the initial decline in television news coverage following 9/11, Osama bin Laden was mentioned in over 150 CNN transcripts in three separate months during this period. Although these months represent relative periods of peak television news coverage, during the entire period the number of CNN transcripts mentioning Bin Laden only oscillated between 57 transcripts and 157 transcripts, a comparatively small range. The first

month of increased television news coverage occurred in September 2002, one year after the 9/11 attacks. Over one-third of the articles this month mentioned the one year anniversary of the attacks.

Two months later, in November 2002 another period of peak television news coverage occurred. On November 28, 2002, two, nearly simultaneous, attacks aimed at Israelis were attributed to Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization. The one successful attack, a car-bomb placed in a resort hotel popular among Israeli tourists in Kenya, claimed the lives of 15 people. The hotel bombing occurred 20 minutes after a failed attack on an airplane, when a terrorist fired a missile against an Israeli airliner carrying 261 passengers, which was taking off from the airport. The missile narrowly missed its target and landed in an empty field. Even though there were two attacks during this month, only six CNN transcripts that mentioned bin Laden mentioned the hotel bombings in Kenya. The attack occurred at the end of the month, but even in December the hotel bombings were only mentioned in 18 CNN transcripts that mentioned bin Laden. By looking quickly at the volume of coverage one might assume that the attacks caused this period of peak coverage, but upon further investigation the attacks alone added only a small number of CNN transcripts during November.

The third month of increased television news coverage occurred in March 2003, a month in which two attacks were attributed to bin Laden's terrorist organization. In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia four explosions went off in compounds that housed Americans, other Westerners,

and Saudis. At least 35 people were killed in the attack including eight Americans. Four days later a bomb attack in Morocco killed at least 28 people. These attacks, however, received minimal television news coverage and the majority of CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden during this month focused on three main events: the arrest Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the suspected mastermind behind 9/11, the intensified hunt for bin Laden, and the launch of the invasion of Iraq.

Numerous attacks were attributed to Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization during this period; however, the periods of peak television news coverage do not necessarily align with the timing of attacks. Attacks occurred during some of the periods of peak television news coverage, but there were other attacks orchestrated by Bin Laden that occurred in months in which Bin Laden received a nominal amount of television news coverage. The October 2002 bombing in a nightclub district in Bali that killed nearly 200 people was mentioned in 33 of the transcripts, however the total 114 transcripts that month was well below the total number of transcripts of both the preceding and following months. Likewise, the Ghriba synagogue bombing in Tunisia in April 2002, the attacks on a Yemen hospital in December 2002, a suicide bombing at a hotel in Jakarta in August 2003, and the bombings outside two synagogues in Istanbul in November 2003 all occurred during months in which the television news coverage Osama bin Laden fell within the normal amount of coverage for the entire period. This illustrates that these particular attacks did not increase bin Laden's notoriety among the American public because the television news coverage bin Laden received

during those months was no greater than during months in which attacks did not occur.

This period immediately following 9/11 marked a transition period for the overall amount of television news coverage received by Osama bin Laden. Even though coverage decreased drastically four months after 9/11, Bin Laden was mentioned in more than 57 transcripts each month during this entire period. Prior to 9/11, Bin Laden had only received that level of television news coverage on three occasions: during immediate coverage of the 1998 United States embassy bombings, in anticipation of the millennium celebration, and during immediate coverage of the 2000 USS Cole bombing. Following 9/11, Osama bin Laden received an overall increased level of television news coverage and was mentioned consistently in CNN transcripts at a level that had previously only occurred during periods of peak coverage. Simply stated, the average television news coverage bin Laden received following 9/11 far surpassed the average television news coverage he received prior to the attacks.

**b. Al-Qaeda**

Similar to Osama bin Laden, the television news coverage al-Qaeda received following 9/11 made the formerly elusive terrorist organization a household name. Prior to 9/11, the most television news coverage al-Qaeda had received was mention in 13 transcripts in August 1998, the month of the United States embassy bombings. In the month of September 2001, al-Qaeda received mention in 164 CNN transcripts and this coverage continued to escalate until December 2001 during which al-Qaeda was mentioned in 715

transcripts. Al-Qaeda was first mentioned in a September 12, 2001 transcript in which a CNN correspondent attempts to define al-Qaeda, a previously infrequently used term, to the American audience.

Al-Qaeda is the terrorism network that U.S. intelligence officers say is operated by Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda is less a group than it is a network of various people around the world engaged in terrorism, and that is the name of it, al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup>

This simple description of such a complicated organization almost seems inappropriate in retrospect, but this further illustrates what little the American public knew about al-Qaeda at the time of the 9/11 attacks and how quickly that changed. Although the television news coverage began to decline after its peak in December 2001, al-Qaeda was mentioned in no fewer than 100 CNN transcripts during the entire period between 9/11 and the 2004 bombings of the Madrid train line.

As seen in Figure 7, after the initial decline in television news coverage following 9/11, al-Qaeda received mention in over 300 CNN transcripts on three separate occasions. Unlike the transcripts mentioning Osama bin Laden, the range of the number of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda was more than twice as large, from a low of 106 transcripts to a high of 324 transcripts. The first period of peak coverage after the initial decline, occurred in May 2002. No attacks were attributed to al-Qaeda during this month however a

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<sup>57</sup> (Hemmer, Chen, and Boettcher 2001)

large majority of the transcripts that mentioned al-Qaeda discussed a new heightened concern about a possible new terrorist attack against the United States. The FBI warned of "the potential targeting of commercial airliners in the United States by al-Qaeda operative armed with shoulder-fired missiles".<sup>58</sup> In addition, intelligence agencies had witnessed "an increased level of chatter and activity over the past couple of months suggesting that another al-Qaeda terrorist attack could possibly be in the works".<sup>59</sup> Just the threat of an impending attack provides al-Qaeda with immense television news coverage and although they did not strike during the month of May 2002, they received peak coverage and achieved their goal of notoriety among the American public.

The second instance of peak television news coverage occurred in September 2002 marking the one year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. This month, 89 of the 324 transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda also mentioned the one-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. This provides an example of the lasting effects an attack can have on the volume of television news coverage al-Qaeda receives. Al-Qaeda not only received coverage during the 9/11 attacks, but also received a brand new wave of television news coverage on the one-year anniversary.

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<sup>58</sup> (Blitzer 2002)

<sup>59</sup> (O'Brien and Koch 2002)

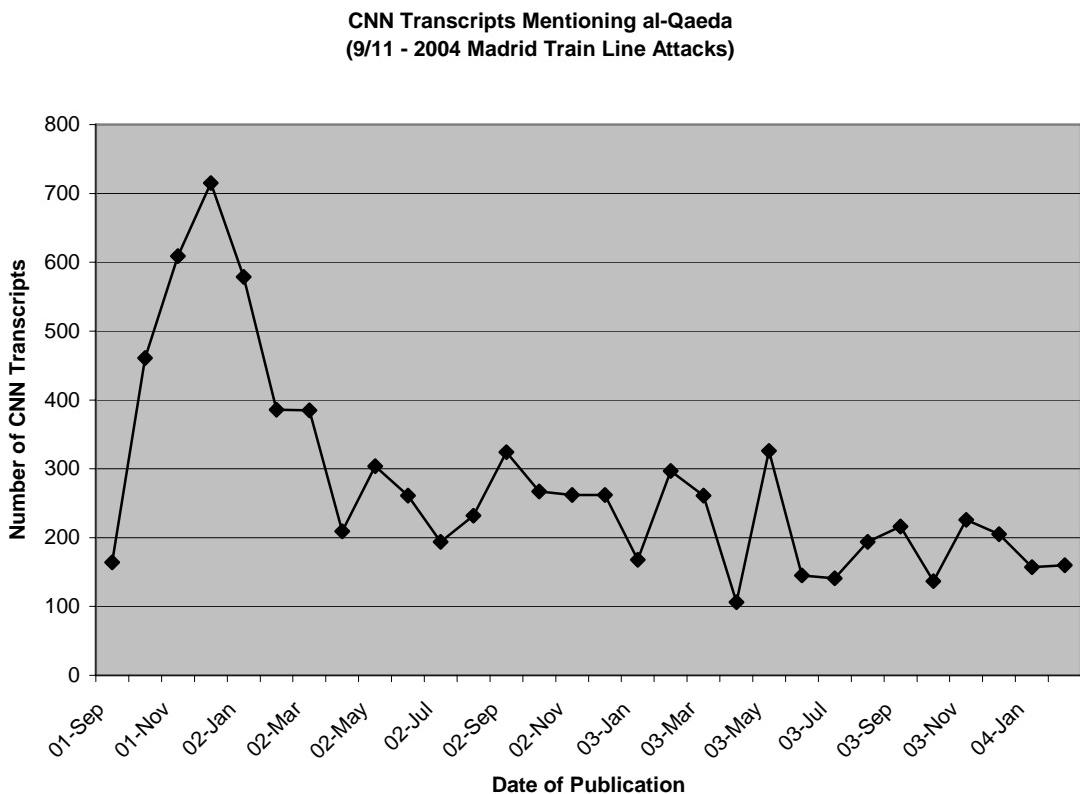


Figure 7. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between 9/11 and the 2004 Madrid Train Line Attacks

The third, and final, instance of peak television news coverage during this period occurred in May 2003. Again no attacks attributed to al-Qaeda occurred during this month, yet the group still received mention in 326 CNN transcripts during the month.

Although seven attacks attributed to al-Qaeda occurred during this period between 9/11 and the 2004 Madrid bombings, al-Qaeda did not receive peak television news coverage during any one of the months in which the attacks occurred. Likewise, the attacks did not necessarily occur in months following a month of low coverage either. Nevertheless, this period

marked a breaking out period for al-Qaeda as far as garnering the attention of the television news media. From receiving virtually no coverage to being mentioned in at least 100 CNN transcripts a month, al-Qaeda made themselves a known entity not only to governmental agencies, but to the American public at large.

#### **B. 2004 BOMBING OF THE MADRID TRAIN LINES**

##### **1. Background**

On March 11, 2004 ten bombs were detonated in four different locations along Madrid's train system. In total, 191 people were killed and more than 600 people suffered injuries. Seven of the bombs exploded at one of the major hubs for both the commuter train line and the metro line, Atocha station; three on one of the approaching trains and four outside on the street near the entrance. The other three bombs were planted and detonated in two different small commuter stations in Madrid. All ten bombs were planted in backpacks and detonated remotely by cell phones. Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigade claimed responsibility for the bombings on behalf of al-Qaeda.

##### **2. Presentation of the Models**

###### **a. Osama bin Laden**

After receiving relatively consistent television news coverage for two years, the bombings in Madrid coincided with a large increase in CNN transcripts mentioning Osama bin Laden. After two years of steady coverage the American public becomes accustomed to the

volume of coverage even if it remains at an elevated state. The bombings in Madrid marked the first time since the 9/11 attacks that such a large spike in the volume of television news coverage of Osama bin Laden occurred. Of the 266 CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden that month, 117 transcripts also mentioned the Madrid bombings. The extensive coverage of the Madrid bombings contributed greatly to this spike in television news coverage. The television news coverage does not make a direct link between the attack and Bin Laden, but rather stresses the United States military's announcement to "step up a search, the search for al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden" in the wake of the intelligence that "Osama bin Laden's terrorist group is behind the Madrid train bombing."<sup>60</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 8, besides the month of the Madrid bombings, Osama Bin Laden was mentioned in more than 200 CNN transcripts in only one other month during the period between the Madrid bombings and the bombing of the London subway in July 2005. This second month of peak coverage occurred in October 2004, the same month that three suicide car bombings killed 34 people and injured over 100 others. The bombings took place at two resorts in Egypt, just over the Israeli border, that served as a popular vacation spot among Israeli tourists. Interestingly enough, this attack was only mentioned in 24 CNN transcripts that also mentioned bin Laden. The cause for the peak television news coverage this month was not, in fact, an attack orchestrated by bin Laden, but rather the upcoming elections in which bin Laden served as a main topic of debate.

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<sup>60</sup> (Lin 2004)

**CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden**  
**(2004 Madrid Train Line Attacks - 2005 London Subway Bombings)**

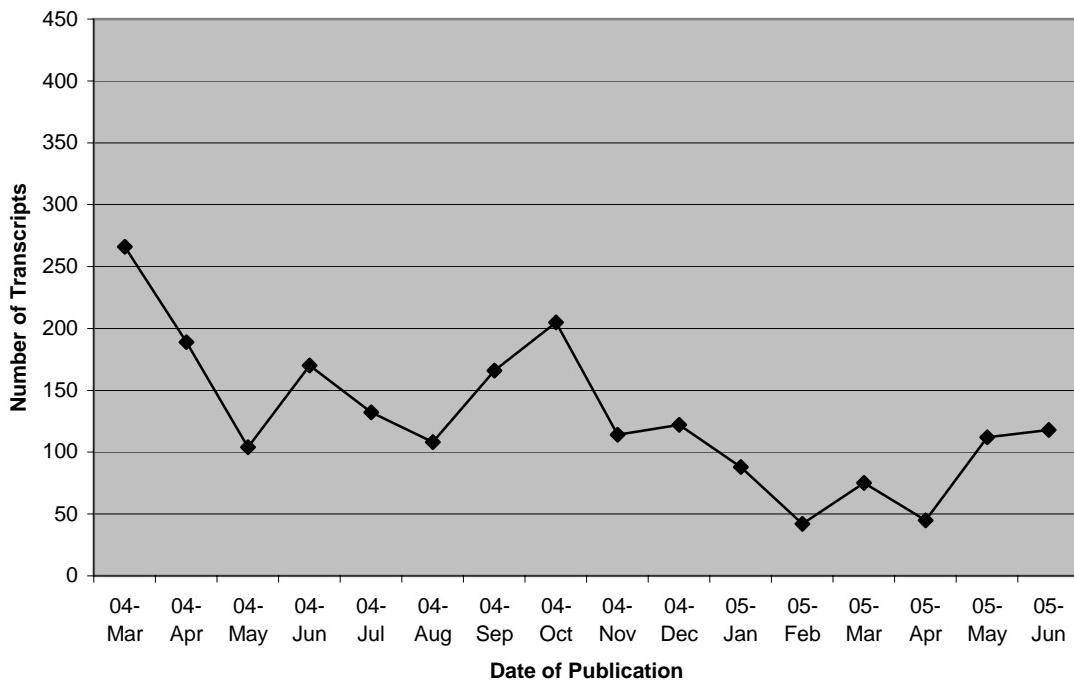


Figure 8. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden Between the 2004 Madrid Train Line Attacks and the 2005 London Subway Bombings

During this month bin Laden released his first video message in nearly three years, the timing of which is believed to display his influence on the presidential election. It is in this video that Osama bin Laden addresses the American people directly by stating:

Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or al Qaeda. Your security is in your own hands. Any nation that does not attack us will not be attacked.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> (Cooper 2004)

The election was mentioned in every single one of the 204 CNN transcripts that mentioned Osama bin Laden during this month. Even without conducting the attacks in Egypt, bin Laden would have received a period of peak television news coverage this month just by virtue of remaining a top threat to the United States and its assets. Following this month of peak television news coverage, the CNN transcripts mentioning Osama bin Laden returned to the same oscillating levels they were at during the months preceding the Madrid attacks.

**b. Al-Qaeda**

After receiving coverage in 160 CNN transcripts in the previous month, al-Qaeda received coverage in 417 transcripts in the month during which the Madrid bombings occurred. As depicted in Figure 9, following this large spike in television news coverage, a general period of declining coverage continued for the next twelve months. Although the number of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda declined after the Madrid bombings, al-Qaeda was mentioned in over 300 CNN transcripts for six straight months following the March 2004 bombings.

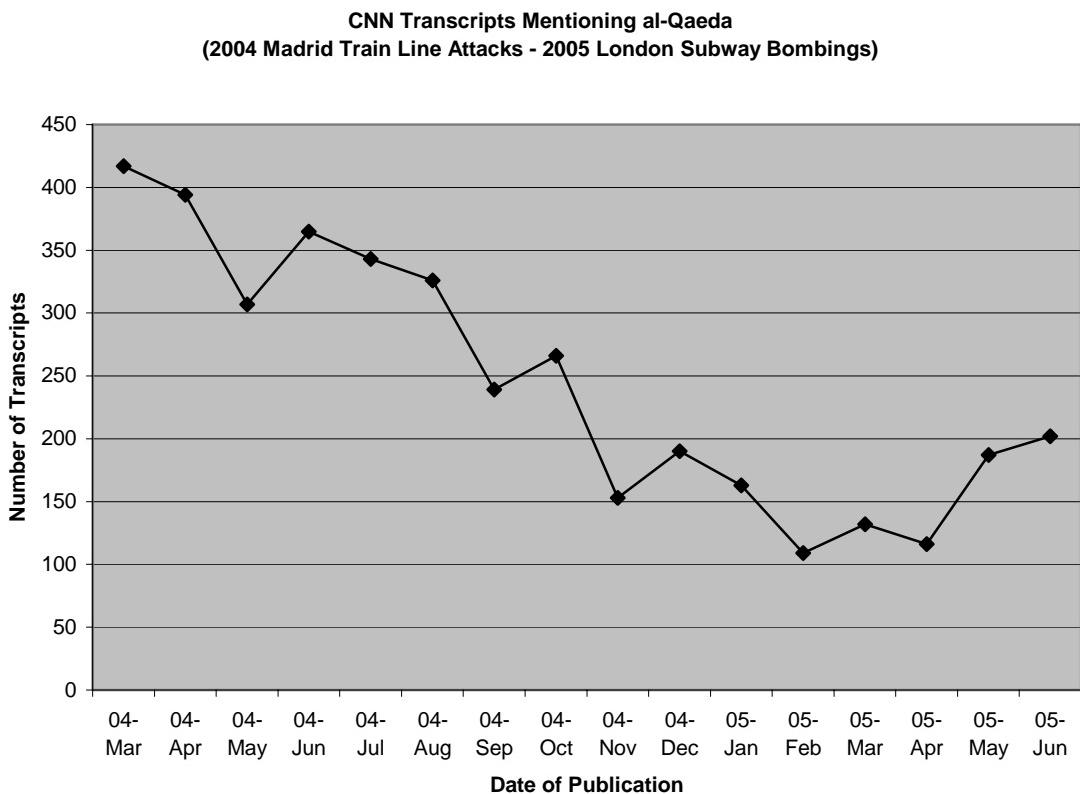


Figure 9. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between the 2004 Madrid Train Line Attacks and the 2005 London Subway Bombings

For the first two months, many of the transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda also mentioned the Madrid bombings, but the Madrid bombings were rarely mentioned in the next four months despite the high volume of television news coverage. This extended period of increased coverage was due, in fact, not to one single attack by the terrorist organization, but rather due to numerous events occurring during the period that al-Qaeda had an influence on including: the handover of power from the United States to the Iraqis, the transfer of Saddam Hussein to Iraqi custody, the release of the images of the Abu Ghraib torture, the beheading of the American

contractor Nicholas Berg, and the murder of four American Blackwater contractors. For example, in a CNN transcript of an interview with Nicholas Berg's father, Michael Berg he states: "I'm saying that I can understand that the Iraqi people would feel the same way about an American who killed one of their family members, as I feel about the al-Qaeda."<sup>62</sup> This provides an example of television news coverage al-Qaeda receives that has nothing to do with their recent terrorist activities, but rather simply the presence they have.

In October 2004, the month during which the two Egyptian resorts were bombed, al-Qaeda was mentioned in 266 CNN transcripts. Forty of the transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda also made mention of the Egypt bombings; however these still only represent a small fraction of the transcripts that month. Similar to the television news coverage of Osama bin Laden during this month, 261 of the 266 CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda also mentioned the upcoming presidential election. At first, it may appear that the relative peak in television news coverage was caused by the bombings in Egypt, but upon further investigation it becomes obvious that the bombings were only a minor contributing factor and the peak would have occurred even if the attacks had not.

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<sup>62</sup> (Blitzer 2004)

## C. 2005 BOMBING OF THE LONDON SUBWAY

### 1. Background

On July 7, 2005, four suicide bomb blasts targeted the public transportation system in London. The blast killed 56 people and injured more than 700 others. Three of the suicide bombers struck at the London underground train system within moments of each other. About one hour later, the fourth bomb detonated on a crowded double-decker bus. All four attacks occurred in the morning at the height of rush hour not only increasing the number or casualties, but also shutting down an entire city.

### 2. Presentation of the Models

#### a. *Osama Bin Laden*

Unlike the preceding large attacks, Osama bin Laden did not receive an increased level of television news coverage in the wake of the London subway bombings. In fact, as Figure 10 highlights, during this 18 month period bin Laden was mentioned in fewer CNN transcripts on only three occasions. On the other hand, there were three months in which bin Laden received peak coverage during this period.

**CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden  
(2005 London Subway Bombings - December 2006)**

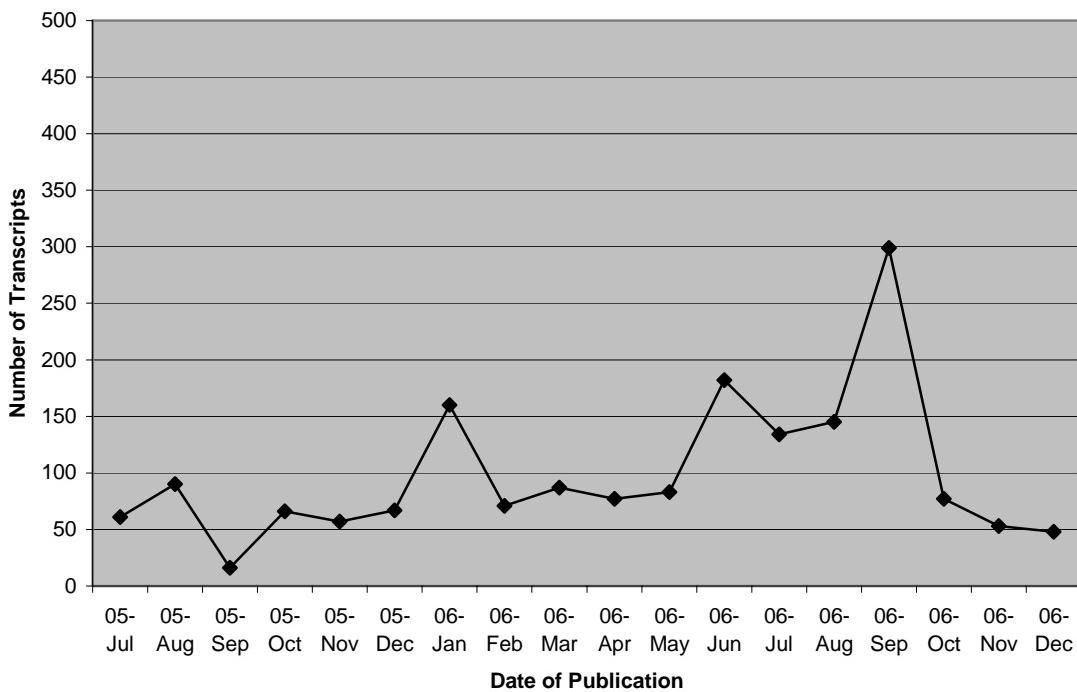


Figure 10. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning Osama bin Laden Between the 2005 London Subway Bombings and December 2006

The first period of peak television news coverage occurred in January 2006. During the month 160 transcripts mentioned bin Laden and a large portion of those articles referenced the audiotape that bin Laden first aired on the Arab language network Al-Jazeera on January 18, 2006. Bin Laden's tape was released in January, although it is estimated that the tape was created months earlier. In efforts to exercise his control and influence over the television news media, it is believed that Osama bin Laden creates taped messages and releases them at a time of his choosing.

This tape was ready to go for any news event that Osama Bin Laden wanted to react to. And of course the big news of that was this strike in Pakistan that killed 18 people, a number of them members of al Qaeda...<sup>63</sup>

In response to news events, Osama bin Laden assures his audience, including the American public that he and his terrorist organization very much remain a threat.

The second period of peak television news coverage occurred in June 2006, the same month Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed. Although it is not known whether Zarqawi was a rival or lieutenant to bin Laden, Zarqawi gave al-Qaeda a highly visible presence in Iraq at a time when its original leaders went into hiding, or were killed, after the 9/11 attacks. During this month, the dynamic relationship between bin Laden and Zarqawi was analyzed extensively. All but 60 of the 181 CNN transcripts mentioning Bin Laden that month also mentioned Zarqawi.

The third, and final, period of peak television news coverage occurred in September 2006, the month marking the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Of the 299 CNN transcripts that mentioned bin Laden during the month, 133 of the transcripts also mentioned the anniversary of 9/11. During an interview with Larry King, when asked what she thought about the ongoing hunt for Osama bin Laden, Hillary Clinton stated:

I'm dumbfounded. If somebody had told me five years ago that the mastermind of this attack on America, with all of our power, would still be

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<sup>63</sup> (Kagan and Nasr 2006)

not only alive but putting out videotapes and taunting us, I wouldn't have believed it.<sup>64</sup>

This month provided an opportunity to not only memorialize the events that had taken place five years earlier, but also an opportunity to assess both the progress that had been made in fighting terrorism and the level of threat that still existed.

Over the course of this entire period there was a general increase in television news coverage of Osama bin Laden following the London subway bombing and continuing up through the five-year anniversary of 9/11 after which coverage dropped off significantly through the end of 2006.

**b. Al-Qaeda**

The first period of increased coverage occurred in November 2005. This rise in television news coverage occurred during the same month as a series of coordinated bomb attacks on three hotels in Amman, Jordan. All three of the hotels were frequented by American, Israeli, and European military contractors, journalists, business people, and diplomats. In addition, the city itself has long been described as a gate way for westerners into Baghdad and Iraq at large, leading many to entertain the possibility of a connection between the Amman bombings and the war in Iraq.<sup>65</sup> Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks which killed 60 people and injured 115 others. Of the 247 CNN transcripts that made mention of al-Qaeda, 105 transcripts also mentioned the Amman bombings. As illustrated in Figure

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<sup>64</sup> (King and Cooper 2006)

<sup>65</sup> (Phillips and Lisovicz 2005)

11, this increased level of coverage was not a spike, but rather the beginning of a continued period of increased levels of television news coverage that carried on through May 2006.

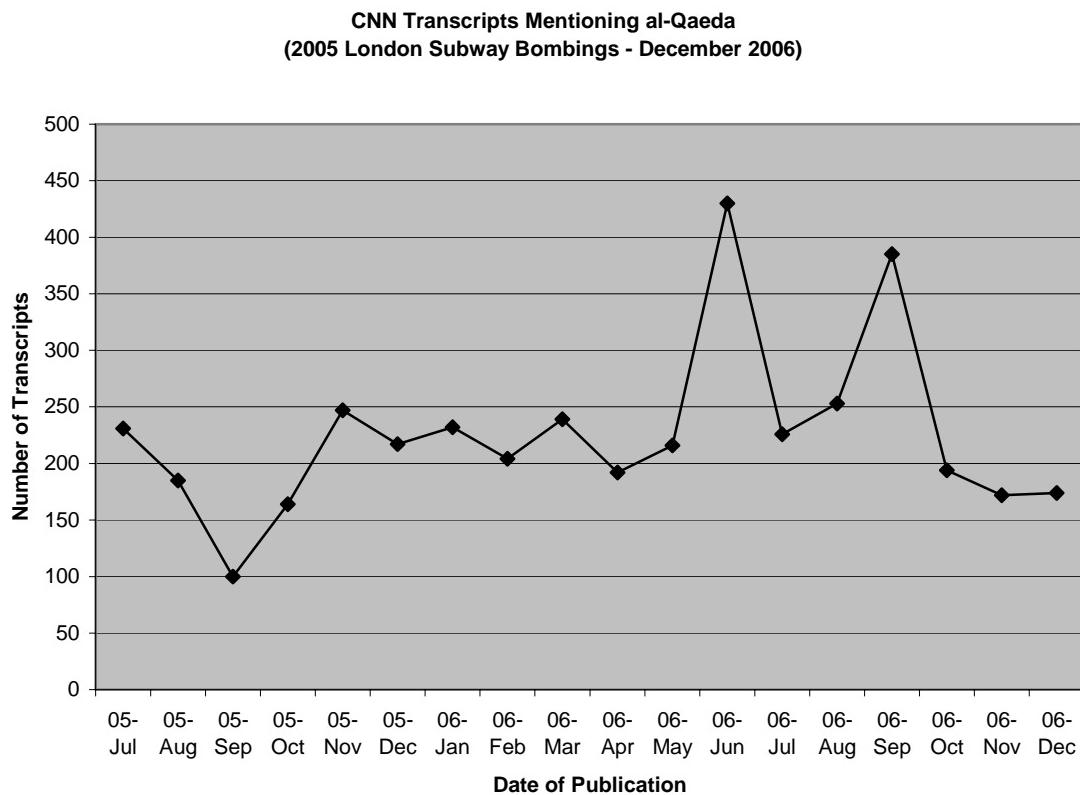


Figure 11. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between the 2005 London Subway Bombings and December 2006

The following month, in June 2006, there was a sharp peak in television news coverage of al-Qaeda. The number of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda in June was 430 transcripts, more than double the transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda during the previous month. As in the case of Osama bin Laden, a majority of the transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda in June 2006 also mentioned the death of Abu Musab al-

Zarqawi. The death of Zarqawi was lauded as a military success, but also created concern with regards to retaliation.

Of course, the death of al-Zarqawi doesn't mean United States troops can relax. They remain the target of Iraq's homegrown insurgency. And there's much concern al-Qaeda in Iraq will try to take some revenge as well.<sup>66</sup>

Speculation about al-Qaeda's response to Zarqawi's death dominated the CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda. This type of coverage illustrates the attempts of the television news to stay abreast of possible future attacks by al-Qaeda ever since the 9/11 attacks.

A third distinct peak in television news coverage occurred in September 2006 marking the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Of the 385 CNN transcripts that mentioned al-Qaeda during the month of September, 161 transcripts also mentioned the five-year anniversary of 9/11. The extensive reporting of 9/11 five years later not only included revisiting the key events of that day as they happened, but also looking at how the world had changed since that horrific day.

Six a.m. Eastern, September 11, 2001, the nation just waking up to what seemed like a normal morning, no hint of what was to come. But in fact, 19 terrorists had already set in motion a plan that would change our world forever. Five years later, we remember.<sup>67</sup>

Such a vivid replay of the day's events, both in pictures and words forced every American watching the

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<sup>66</sup> (O'Brien and Nasr 2006)

<sup>67</sup> (O'Brien and O'Brien 2006)

television news to relive the details of that horrific day five years earlier. The attacks of 9/11 may have occurred in 2001, but September 11<sup>th</sup> will always be a day of remembrance and reflection regardless the year. This one day will assure al-Qaeda a lasting legacy and although the American public will not quickly forget the masterminds behind the attacks, the television news will be sure to serve as a public reminder each year.

## V. THE OVERALL MODELS

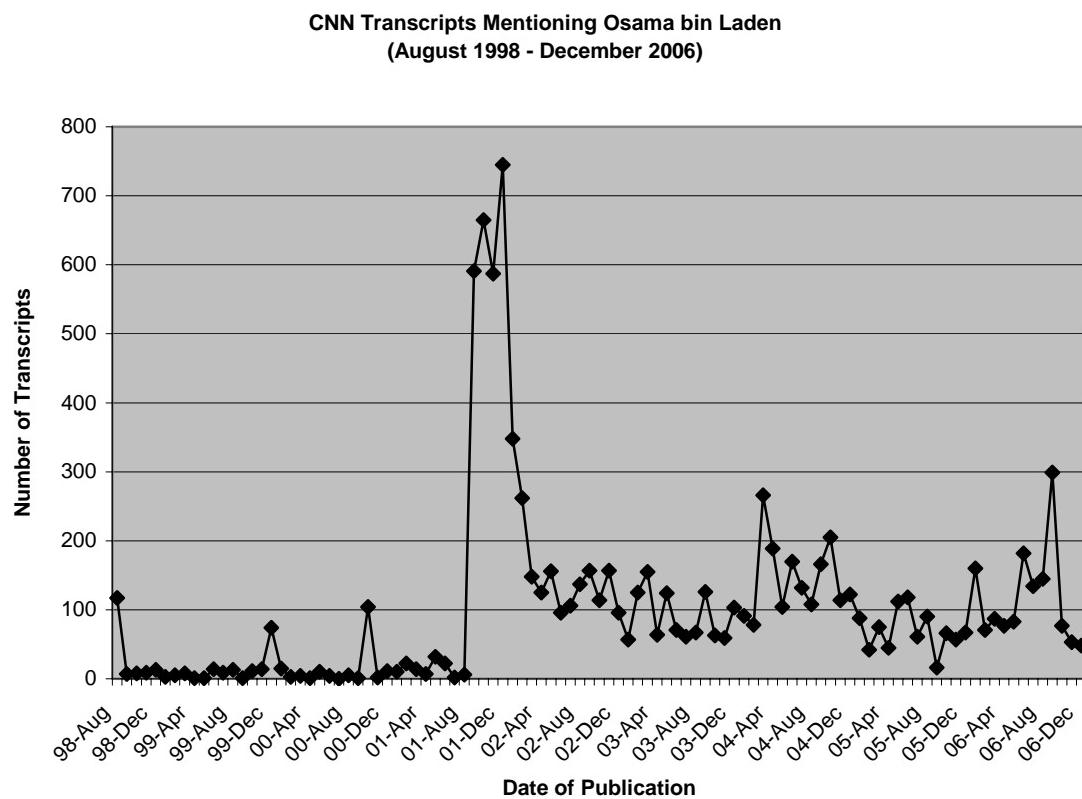
### A. OSAMA BIN LADEN

In looking at the volume of CNN transcripts over the entire five-and-a-half year period between August 1998 and December 2006, it is evident that the attacks of 9/11 mark a distinct transition in the television news coverage Osama bin Laden received.

Overall, bin Laden received a small amount of television news coverage prior to 9/11. During this period there were three months in which bin Laden received a peak volume of television news coverage. Two of these months align directly with two terrorist attacks credited to Bin Laden: the 1998 United States embassy bombings and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole. The third period of peak television news coverage occurred in December 1999 and occurred as a result of the increased terrorism prevention measures in place surrounding the millennium celebrations. In all three cases the spike in the volume of CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden only endured for one month. The volume of CNN transcripts in the months preceding and following the periods of peak television news coverage returned to the small amount of coverage bin Laden received in this period overall.

As Figure 11 illustrates, the attacks of 9/11 resulted in an unprecedented volume of television news coverage for Osama bin Laden. Beginning in September 2001 and continuing for six months, Bin Laden received an immense amount of coverage. This marked the first time some Americans had

ever heard of Bin Laden, and more importantly, for most Americans this period marked the first time they understood who Bin Laden was and exactly what he was capable of.



mentioning bin Laden topped 200 on three separate occasions. The first peak occurred in March 2004, the same month the bombings of the Madrid train line system. The other two peaks, however, were not caused by al-Qaeda attacks, but rather significant events occurring in the United States that were influenced by bin Laden. The second peak occurred in October 2004, in anticipation of the November presidential election, in which the candidate's plan for dealing with the threat of bin Laden and terrorism, in general, proved a main topic of debate. The third peak occurred in September 2006, the five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks during which the television news reenacted the events that occurred five years earlier and reported on how the United States had changed since 9/11. Interestingly enough, numerous attacks attributed to al-Qaeda occurred during this time frame that did not cause an increase in the number of CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden. Some of the attacks occurred during months with a very low volume of television news coverage and other attacks occurred during months with a higher volume of television news coverage. Even a large scale attack such as the bombing of the London subway did not result in a peak of television news coverage during July 2005.

#### **B. AL-QAEDA**

Upon examination of the entire period of interest from August 1998 through December 2006, it is evident that the volume of television news coverage received by al-Qaeda changed drastically with the attacks of 9/11.

During the three years between the August 1998 and August 2001, the most television news coverage al-Qaeda

received was mention in 13 transcripts during the month of the United States embassy bombings. Furthermore, al-Qaeda was not mentioned in a single CNN transcript in 23 of the 36 months preceding 9/11. This lack of continuous coverage left most Americans unfamiliar with al-Qaeda's name and certainly unaware of the immense depth and capabilities of Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization.

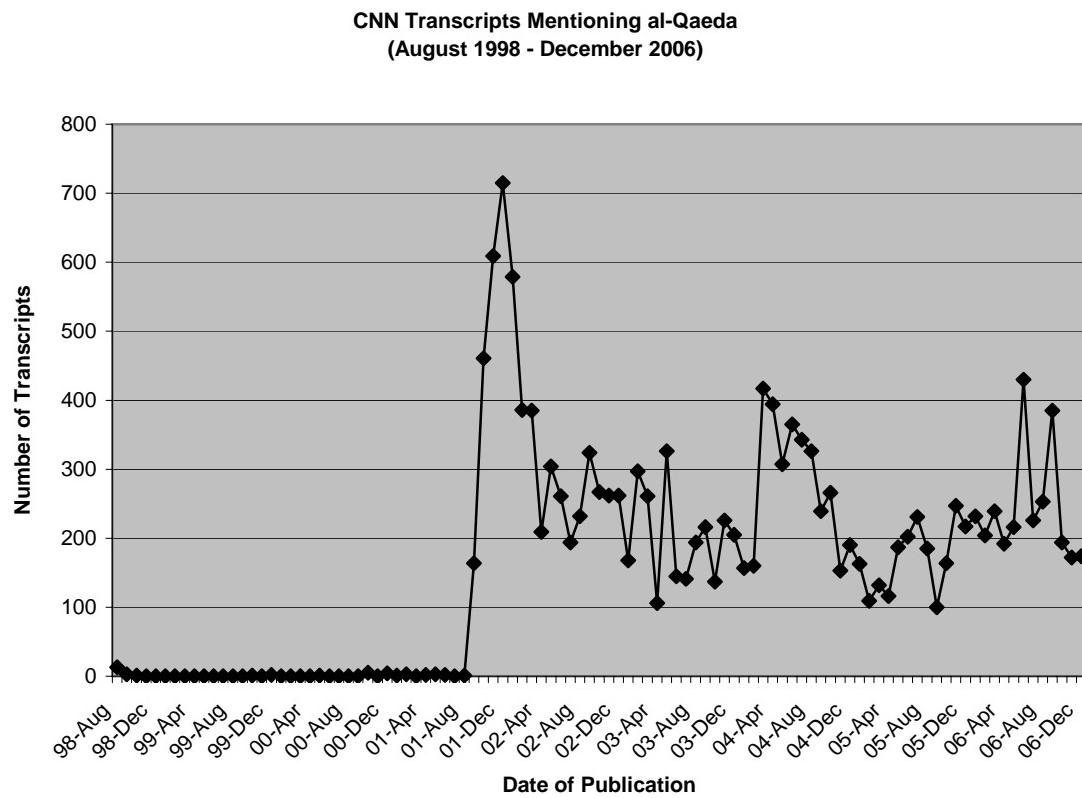


Figure 13. Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda Between August 1998 and December 2006

The attacks of 9/11 completely transformed al-Qaeda's presence in CNN transcripts. A large increase in television news coverage occurred in September 2001, however, as Figure 13 illustrates, it was during the following four months that the volume of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda reached

levels that have not been seen since. The coverage al-Qaeda received in September 2001 was unprecedented at the time, but in the period post 9/11 this level of coverage became common. It was during the months immediately following 9/11 that al-Qaeda became a common term throughout the United States. The volume of television news coverage this terrorist organization received provides a good indication to what extent al-Qaeda impacted nearly every facet of life in the United States.

Beginning in February 2002, the volume of television news coverage had fallen to levels that would be seen again. The number of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda ranged from 100 to 430 between February 2002 and December 2006. The volume of television news coverage rose to the higher end of the range during some months in which attacks took place, but likewise, fell towards the lower end of the range during other months in which attacks took place. For example, a large increase in the number of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda aligned with the March 2004 bombings of the Madrid train line system. On the other hand, the volume of CNN transcripts mentioning al-Qaeda during July 2005, the month of the London subway bombings, fell well in the middle of the range. In addition, a large number of CNN transcripts mentioned al-Qaeda in June 2006. No attacks attributed to al-Qaeda occurred during this month, however during this month Zarqawi, a top al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, was killed. The speculation concerning the impact Zarqawi's death would have on the terrorist organization, in general, in addition to what retaliation the United States should expect from al-Qaeda resulted in an immense amount of television news coverage for al-Qaeda.

### C. COMPARISON

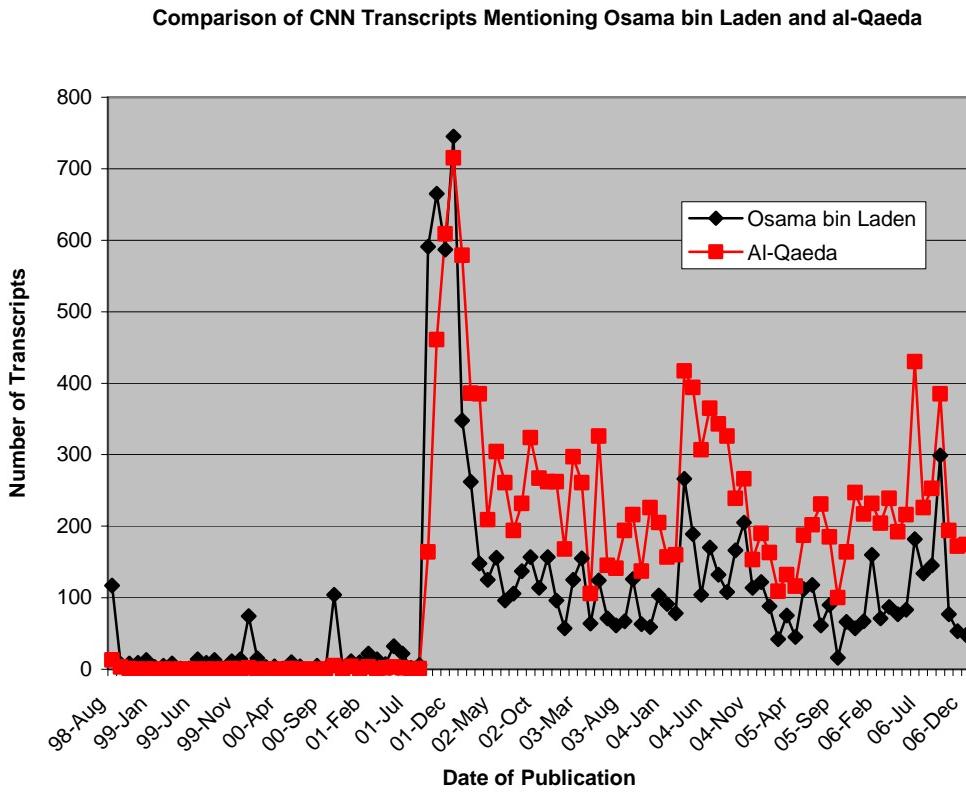


Figure 14. Comparison of the Volume of CNN Transcripts Mentioning al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden

#### 1. Before 9/11

As evident in Figure 14, prior to 9/11 Osama bin Laden received more television news coverage than al-Qaeda. Although very little was known regarding bin Laden, even less was known about his terrorist organization as a whole. Bin Laden proved a threat to America, but the depth and breadth of his connections remained a mystery. Although television news coverage of both bin Laden and al-Qaeda spiked in direct correlation with the 1998 United States

embassy bombings and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, the increase in television news coverage surrounding bin Laden was more distinct and exaggerated. For example, in August 1998 bin Laden received mention in 117 CNN transcripts compared to the 13 CNN transcripts that mentioned al-Qaeda. Likewise, in October 2000, al-Qaeda only received mention in five CNN transcripts while bin Laden was mentioned in a total of 104 CNN transcripts.

## **2. After 9/11**

The attacks of 9/11 served as a transition point with regards to the volume of television news coverage received by both Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The number of CNN transcripts mentioning bin Laden and al-Qaeda reached an all time high in December 2001. Beginning in 2002, al-Qaeda began receiving considerably more television news coverage than bin Laden. Prior to 9/11, bin Laden had consistently received more television news coverage than al-Qaeda, but every month, beginning in January 2002 and continuing through December 2006, al-Qaeda received more television than bin Laden. It was during the months immediately following 9/11 that bin Laden and al-Qaeda transformed from little known entities to household names. 9/11 gave a face and name to terrorism and caught the full attention of the American public.

## **3. Overall Trends**

The overall trends in television news coverage of both Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda appear similar overall. Upon further investigation there are, however, subtle differences. For example, both bin Laden and al-Qaeda tend

to receive peak television news coverage during the same months, but the magnitude differs greatly. Aside from the months of peak television news coverage, the volume of coverage bin Laden received does not appear in parallel with the volume of coverage al-Qaeda received. Additionally, the television news coverage of al-Qaeda shows more volatility in the sense that the extremes of low and high volumes of coverage create a much wider range than the range of television news coverage surrounding bin Laden. Although the terms, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, are often used synonymously in the American press, these data illustrate the differences in television news coverage both bin Laden and al-Qaeda received.

## VI. CONCLUSION

### A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### 1. No Significant Trend

After mapping the volume of CNN transcripts mentioning Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda along the timeline of attacks attributed to al-Qaeda, it is apparent that no consistent trend exists within this data set. Although months of peak television news coverage often coincided with an al-Qaeda attack some periods of peak coverage occurred during months with no reported attacks. Furthermore, there were a number of al-Qaeda attacks that occurred during months in which bin Laden and al-Qaeda did not receive mention in a higher volume of CNN transcripts. In addition, al-Qaeda attacks did not occur systematically after periods of minimal coverage as one might have expected.

#### a. *Exclusion of Important Events*

One possible reason this data set did not illuminate any consistent trends could be too many variables. As far as the timeline was concerned, only successful attacks attributed to al-Qaeda were considered. Statements made by bin Laden or other members of al-Qaeda were not included. Likewise, strikes by the United States against bin Laden or other al-Qaeda operatives and their assets were not considered. These omitted factors were sometimes noticed during a deeper investigation into a month of peak coverage, but if they occurred during a month with a

normal volume of television news coverage they may have very well been overlooked.

**b. Residual Effects**

One of the biggest reasons this data set did not illuminate any trends was due to the residual effects that each al-Qaeda attack proved to have. The impact of each terrorist attack attributed to al-Qaeda was not isolated to one calendar month. Investigations, trials, and anniversaries all proved to have second and third order effects upon the volume of television news coverage received by bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Often these higher order effects proved to have a greater impact on the volume of coverage than the initial attack itself because more information had been gained since the attack.

**B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK**

**1. Analyze Content**

In this analysis, any CNN transcript that mentioned Osama Bin Laden or Al-Qaeda was included without any regard to the extent the transcript pertained to the terms searched. This all-inclusive approach increased the shear volume of transcripts and included articles that, although they mentioned one of the terms, had very little to do with Bin Laden or al-Qaeda. However, excluding transcripts that did not mainly focus on Bin Laden or al-Qaeda would eliminate transcripts that demonstrate the extent to which Bin Laden and al-Qaeda infiltrated varying aspects of American culture. With both extremes, and their consequences, in mind an alternative approach to this

analysis would be to use the same data set used in this analysis, but, in addition to analyzing the shear volume of transcripts, analyze the content of the articles. Using categories such as foreign policy, politics, economics, and pop culture, just to mention a few, would eliminate some of the interaction that exists between periods of peak coverage and events that were not directly related to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda such as the millennium celebration, elections, and anniversaries of attacks.

## **2. Analyze Coverage Provided By Other News Sources**

Although CNN was ranked as the number one television news source Americans turn to for international news, it only represents one source of information in a media filled world.<sup>68</sup> Not only are there many different television news sources, but also different types of media entirely. Analyzing the coverage Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda received from other news sources could highlight the differences that exist in reporting among different news mediums.

### **a. Additional Television News Sources**

In addition to CNN, there are numerous other television news outlets including additional cable networks news stations as well as network and local news sources. Analyzing the coverage of additional television news sources based in the United States would demonstrate whether or not the trends found in the volume of CNN transcripts prove similar across all television news sources based in the United States.

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<sup>68</sup> (Project For Excellence in Journalism 2006)

Furthermore, analyzing television news outlets outside of the United States, such as Al-Jazeera, the premier Arabic news network, and the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) based in the United Kingdom could also illuminate additional items of interest. A comparison of the amount of coverage CNN, Al-Jazeera, and BBC each devote to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda might shed light on differences that exist not only among television news sources owned and operated by different countries, but also news sources with vastly different target audiences.

***b. Newspapers***

In addition to the internet, many Americans still turn to print newspapers for their main news source. Just as different television news outlets often offer differing perspectives on a story, different newspapers often offering different reports. It would be interesting to compare the volume of coverage not only between newspapers and television transcripts, but also among different newspapers as well. Comparing coverage by The New York Times and USA Today would be an example of two newspapers whose content, delivery, and audience differ greatly.

***c. Internet***

At the onset of al-Qaeda's operations television news may have been the only medium able to provide breaking news coverage and sensational video, but the growth of the internet broke up the monopoly on around-the-clock reporting previously held by television news. Many people are now turning to online versions of their favorite newspaper or television broadcast for daily news. Aside from these

reputable online news sources, the internet has also provided terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, a tool to deliver its message to an international audience exactly as it chooses. In television news, statements, videotapes, and interviews may all be edited or cut before airing, but the internet facilitates unedited communication between al-Qaeda and its target audience. With easy access, lack of regulations, and the ability to shape one's own message terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda are becoming increasingly reliant on the internet to not only communicate with their supporters and members, but also to influence the opinion of the general public. The immense reach of the internet to include web sites, e-mail, and blogs, is certainly used by al-Qaeda and it would be interesting to analyze whether the information put on the internet has a reciprocal impact.

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